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**The Caste of the Nation: Untouchability and Citizenship in South India**

**Abstract:** *Following the devastating tsunami that ravaged parts of the South Indian coast on Boxing Day 2004, there were reports of continuing caste discrimination against India's Scheduled Caste (Dalit) community. The reported absence of common feeling shattered the image of India as an 'imagined community'. Taking its cue from Aloysius, Nigam and Chatterjee, this paper draws on field-notes and archival reports to examine the ongoing and contested processes of nation and national identity formation in India. It is argued that the template against which the postcolonial state imagined the Indian 'nation' was one that excluded marginalised sections of the population. The paper concludes by asking whether India may be seen as a 'national-state' and critically analysing the interplay between caste and nation.*

**Key Words:** Caste, Nation, Untouchability, Nation Formation

## **The Caste of the Nation: Untouchability and Citizenship in South India**

Nagapattinam, January 6: There's something even an earthquake measuring 9 on the Richter scale and a tsunami that kills over 1 lakh people can't crack: the walls between caste (Sreenivas 2005).

*When the cheris rise, the nation will be turned on its head (DPI Slogan).*

### **Introduction**

On December 26<sup>th</sup> 2004 a tidal wave, triggered by a distant earthquake, caused widespread death and destruction in Asia, including the coast of the South Indian state of Tamilnadu. The tsunami prompted a global outpouring of grief and solidarity. There were countless stories of heroism, altruism and public spiritedness as volunteers rushed to aid the injured and bring what succour they could to a devastated region. Within weeks, however, reports suggested that the unity forged in crisis had distinct social and cultural limits. There were accounts of 'untouchables' being forced out of relief camps (Husain 2005), denied relief provisions (Reynolds 2005), and of being too scared to approach government shelters (Indian NGOs 2005). Reports from the ground suggested that relief was directed towards fisher-folk who were the most obvious victims of the disaster, bypassing Dalit communities whose land had been salinated and crops destroyed (Wielenga personal communication). Furthermore, according to the Chairman of the All India Confederation of SC/ST Organisations<sup>1</sup>:

The government initiated separate camps for Dalits and others. Is this the spirit of the Constitution which says that the state will not practice any kind of discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, sex and race? (Raj 2005).

If nationals require a sense of fellow feeling, shared public culture and mutual commitment (Smith 1995), their absence here raises troublesome questions about the Indian ‘nation’ and echoes the colonialists and reformers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century who asserted that “caste is opposed to nationality” (Dirks 2001: 231). The overwhelming diversity of India has led Nigam (2006: 176) to “argue that the very project of Indian nationalism was an impossible one ... because it was impossible to have one common history”. As he notes, and the above examples illustrate, the difficulties attending the location of a common past have ramifications for contemporary Indian citizens. Addressing the longevity of India, Tonnesson (2004: 181) extends the notion of a ‘national’ state to include those “‘plural states’ ... [that] have managed to create a strong national sentiment among their citizens”.

Such arguments, however, privilege the ‘nation’ as a homogenous entity, and the “the focus on national integration tends to gloss over the complex processes of transition and social change involved in national formation” (Hasan 1989: 21). Writing against the grain of homogenising nationalist projects, by contrast, Nigam displaces this prevalent focus to chart ‘the insurrection of little selves’ that “*contest or disturb given ideas of nationhood*” (2006: 20, original emphasis). Given continuing marginalisation of Dalits (ex-Untouchables), this paper will explore the interplay between caste, the state and national identity in India. It begins with an examination of nationalism and nation formation in India before considering ethnographic data. We will assess the extent to which a sense of unity and nationhood has supplanted more ‘parochial’ caste loyalties, and conclude by considering the implications of these findings.

### **Derivative or Diverse?**

Following Goswami's (2004: 4) persuasive rejection of 'methodological nationalism' - whereby scholars presuppose the existence of a bounded national entity and neglect the complex and contingent processes that *produce* the conditions for the nation - it is important to begin with an understanding of the processes of nation-formation and an interrogation of nationalist historiography. The temptations of methodological nationalism are acute in a context where nationalism was heralded as the uprising of an oppressed 'people' against their colonial oppressors. Of course, this facile reading of anti-colonial nationalism was belied even before Partition, but it highlights how nation-formation in Asia is filtered through the colonial experience – whether direct or indirect – and cautions us against nationalist accounts which portray movements for liberation as creating coherent nations through struggle (Aloysius 1997: 214).

Aloysius' insightful critique of such historiography forces us to scrutinise such claims and emphasises that "the becoming of a nation and the setting up of a state system are two different things" (1997: 215). Indeed, the newly independent Asian countries were soon subject to question, and national unity appeared to be the delusion of nationalist protagonists who projected the image of a nation onto the post-colonial state. Chatterjee (1986, 1996) further punctures the mytho-history of 'the midnight hour' by noting that nationalist movements operated in accordance with a template derived from the colonial powers rather than indigenous models of community or government:

The new political processes have, it would seem, managed to effect a displacement of the unifying force of dharma but have replaced it with the unifying concept of "nation" as concretely embodied in the state (Chatterjee 1993: 198).

Chatterjee (1986) examines why the liberatory promises of nascent nation-states have so often been ephemeral. He suggests that rather than being opposites, nationalism and colonialism are meshed together by a value system that operates in the interests of middle class elites. As the tumult of independence fades, therefore, the 'nation' is revealed to be an illusion and authoritarian post-colonial states remain true to their 'colonial inheritance' (Aloysius 1997: 1). For some theorists, a corollary to this is:

a lack of fit between the principles which have gone into the designing of these institutions over many long centuries in Europe, and those informal institutions to which we in India have traditionally been heir: family, caste, village (Saberwal 1986: 2).

The consequence of this disjunction, Inden argues, "is a nation-state that remains ontologically and politically inaccessible to its own citizens" (1990: 197). The predicament confronting modernist nationalism is its inability to model the nation in its image. The flaw in such reasoning is its implicit acceptance of the nationalist myth that, for all its imperfections, the modern 'nation' exists. Such positions, Nigam (2006) shows, cast the alternate imaginings of subaltern classes as *anti-* or *pre-modern*. In fact, Nigam and Aloysius suggest, modern nationalists have not outpaced the 'backward' masses. Rather, the individual rationality of modernist nationalists is itself the real myth. Contesting the false modernity/tradition, nationalist/anti-nationalist dichotomies both authors point to the imbrication of the two. "Traditional dominance", as Aloysius forcefully attests, "... formally transformed itself into state power without undergoing any substantial change" (1997: 227).

A burgeoning literature addresses the resultant dissonance between ‘the nation and its fragments’ (Chatterjee 1993). This discord was apparent even in 1947, when much of the population had no conception of what it meant to be ‘Indian’, stressing regional, linguistic or caste affiliations instead. Narayan’s (2005) research highlights enduring ambiguity about the nation in Dalit conceptions, and contends that the emergence of a Dalit press is facilitating the construction of alternate and resistant identities. Both Aloysius and Chatterjee confront this puzzle of why national-consciousness failed to emerge *despite* a mass-based nationalist movement. Both, ultimately, see nationalism as an elite project in which the ‘masses’ were ‘manoeuvred’ (Chatterjee 1986: 85) rather than mobilised or ‘liberated by national-popular rule’ (Aloysius 1997: 218). The result was a ‘passive revolution’ (Chatterjee 1986: 30) and the ‘nation failed to emerge’ (Aloysius 1997: 217).

Such analysis urges a critical scrutiny of nationalist narrations of history which silence subsidiary narratives (a point strikingly illustrated in Chatterjee’s (1996) omission of Muslim voices). In contradistinction to homogenising endeavours, Chatterjee (2001: 403) points to the submerged voices that contest the nation, and observes “that there is no available historical narrative of the nation that can resolve these contradictions”. Cognate analyses have bolstered the argument that non-Western nationalisms are merely (imperfect) copies of modular forms established elsewhere. Anxious to recover the agency of South Asians and escape uni-linear nationalist accounts, however, Chatterjee (1993: 5) famously takes issue with Anderson (1991). In asking ‘whose imagined community?’ he is primarily contesting the depiction of Asian nations as derivative, but his enquiry also confronts us with the question of who speaks for a community. From this perspective it is baffling that Chatterjee’s initial (1986, 1993) focus on the processes and manoeuvres by which one variant of nationalism triumphed, appears to take the Indian ‘nation’ as given.

Chatterjee (2001: 408) later developed his early insights to contest Anderson's thesis that the nation exists in 'homogenous empty time' – the flat terrain of modernity and capital in which all nationals inhabit the same space of public and civil interaction - and argues that even the same events are experienced differently by real people living in 'heterogeneous time'. Aloysius (1997) more explicitly points to persistent inequalities as rendering India an example of 'nationalism without a nation'. In this he echoes Ambedkar's analysis that nation formation is frustrated by social stratification: "Philosophically it may be possible to consider a nation as a unit but sociologically it cannot but be regarded as consisting of many classes" (cited in Nigam 2006: 245). The moot point is whether arenas for public interaction and communication - upon which a nation is predicated - can exist in a country polarised by caste. Indian national consciousness has been haunted from its very conception by this conundrum with the effect that, despite its centrality to the imagining of India, caste is often obscured in analyses of the 'nation' (Nigam 2006: 225). It is to the conceptual confusions thrown up by this elision that we now turn.

### **Nations in a Caste Context**

In Smith's oft cited definition, a nation is: 'A named human population which shares myths and memories, a mass public culture, a designated homeland, economic unity and equal rights and duties for all members' (1995: 56-7). Notwithstanding the pessimism of the foregoing discussion, 60 years of a nationalising state have arguably created the conditions to classify India as nation so defined. Having inherited a socially divided polity, India has confronted the dialectical play between individuals and communities – most evident in the use of caste categories for affirmative action – in pursuit of 'equal rights and duties' and a 'public culture'. Smith's account, however, lacks the crucial ingredient of 'imagination' or



self-definition. The importance of this is reinforced by Narayan's (2005: 127) finding that "the mediation of print culture" is "constructing *dalitness* as identity" rather than fostering a sense of *national* communion. Such developments compel us to reiterate Ambedkar's emphasis on the subjective aspects of nationhood: "Nationality is a social feeling. It is a feeling of corporate sentiment of oneness which makes those who are charged with it feel that they are kith and kin" (in Aloysius 1997: 153).

The tension between nation and caste is immediately apparent. Ghurye (1932: 1-27) delineated six major features of the system: the segmental division of society, hierarchy, restrictions of feeding and social intercourse, civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, lack of choice of occupation, and restrictions on marriage. Caste operates at a group level and is based on hierarchy and separation. One may belong to only one caste and that caste is ranked vis-à-vis others. The division of society into discrete and hierarchically positioned groups militates against the formation of fellow feeling. Consequently, defining the 'nation' – already problematic in 'multinational' post-colonial states (Oommen 2006) – is further complicated where nationalist rhetoric founders on the rocks of caste.

The complexities thrown up by this situation are transparent in Oommen's commentary on 'nations and nationalism in South Asia'. In dissecting the national imaginings of Hindutva, Oommen notes how they either neglect the contributions to 'Indian culture' of Dravidians, Dalits and Tribals or relegate them to the sphere of 'low culture' (2006: 440). This insight, however, eludes his categorisation of linguistic groups as 'nationalities' and his assertion that: "*South Asian states should be viewed as collectives of nations coexisting within federal states*" (ibid. 443, original emphasis). This evasion of the conceptual quagmire removes the

question of national consciousness to the realm of political institutions. Given that “the dignified co-existence of a plurality of nations *within* a federal state is possible and even desirable” (ibid. 448, original emphasis), the debate turns to the means by which this can be best accomplished.

Having shifted the parameters of inquiry, the mechanisms of democratic governance are frequently identified as the best guarantor of national cohesion. Banerjee’s work on elections encapsulates this trend. “Conducting elections in a fair and efficient way”, she avers, “helps generate not only faith in the democratic system, but also patriotic faith in the idea of India itself” (2007: 1560). Here, voting - as the minimum expression of citizenship – becomes the symbolic affirmation of nationality that confirms India as “indivisibly, both a new nation and a democracy” (ibid.). Ambedkar, Aloysius (1997: 154) notes, likewise defined “the ideal society or nation as democracy”, but he was all too aware that such a nation would have to be forged through struggle. That two scholars of such insight, imagination and commitment to social justice should offer such readings of the ‘nation’, thus, highlights the continuing lacuna regarding caste.

### **Caste, Nation and Citizenship**

The absence of caste in discussions of the Indian ‘nation’ is especially surprising since, as one of the social institutions used to justify colonialism as a civilising mission, it was an inescapable nationalist topic. Arguments about the rule of colonial difference [‘we’ are better than ‘them’], and hence about the inherent incapacity of Indian society to acquire the ‘virtues’ of modernity and nationhood, converged upon this supposedly unique Indian institution and were assumed by modernist nationalists (Dirks 2001: 255). Nehru (1946), thus, viewed caste as responsible for India’s ‘degeneracy’ and Congress committed itself to

remove the ‘disabilities’ of untouchability. Hindu nationalists and critical traditionalists (such as Gandhi) likewise critiqued existing inequalities and sought, respectively, a homogeneous nation of Hindus or a caste system purged of its iniquitous effects. For all their (significant) differences, both nationalist projects effectively articulate(d) an elitist vision of Indian-ness which required lower castes to assimilate into a higher caste norm as a pre-condition for national membership (cf. Nigam 2006: 222; Aloysius 1997: 216).

Rather than celebrating the diversity of Indian culture, the habitually demeaned skills of Dalit artists, artisans and craftsmen were written out of the national picture. The Dalit Resource Centre (Madurai) maintains that identities, skills and crafts have been “systematically ... destroyed by the Brahmanical hegemony to maintain the caste system”, and seeks to recapture and revalorise them (Larbeer & Alexandar 2000: xi). Similarly, Karunakaran, a Dalit activist and development worker, argued that *social* status was a prerequisite for political status. The implicit thrust of his argument was that too narrow a focus on political citizenship obscured the specificities of the Dalit situation:

*Parai* [leather drum] drummers wear out their bodies and bones for *kanji* or *kall*  
[Old rice or liquor] but they should demand fees ... Don’t break this culture,  
give it value! (Interview, January 1999).

Time and again the imbalance in perceptions of Bharatanatyam dancers and folk artists was pointed to as indicative of the marginalisation of Dalits in national narratives. The value placed on brahminical skills and training reinforces the argument that the ‘Indian citizen’ had an upper caste hue. Consequently, “civil society in India [became] a deeply divided and hierarchically structured domain, exclusive of the lower castes” (Pai & Narayanan 2003:

275). Even reservations, intended to counter caste inequality, were based on a narrow analysis that flattened the socio-cultural aspects of untouchability into the political realm and neglected large swathes of Dalit activity.<sup>2</sup>

Recognising the perils inherent in this hidden casteism, lower caste leaders rejected the nationalist elite and argued that colonial rule was preferable to Independence under the higher castes (Nigam 2006: 183). In the 1930s and 1940s, Ambedkar and the Untouchable movement undercut Congress' claim to represent the entire 'Hindu nation' and rebuffed the Gandhian argument that Untouchables should subordinate their cause to the nation's unity. In a coruscating attack, Ambedkar underlined the incompatibility between the imagined communities of caste and nation:

The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste (1987: 48).

This strand of Dalit opinion deplored the predominantly Brahmin, male and bourgeois basis of the nationalist struggle and questioned the possibility of freedom in such a project. Apprehensions about the new polity were captured in Ambedkar's pithy question: "Tell me what share I am to have in the *Swaraj*" (in Omvedt 1994: 216). Ambedkar, Nigam (2006) indicates, thereby rejected the notion that freedom for the whole necessarily entailed freedom for each part. The well-being of Dalits, in other words, was posited to be separate from that of the putative 'nation':

“The nation does not exist”, as Ambedkar wrote in 1943, “it is to be created, and I think it will be admitted that the suppression of a distinct and separate community is not the method of creating a nation” (Prashad 1996: 558).

Well before Independence, thus, the Untouchable movement posed searching questions as to ‘whose imagined community’ the new India would reflect. In contradistinction to elite nationalist narratives, a range of thinkers envisaged scenarios in which subalterns could lead themselves and articulate viable alternatives that encompassed the *social* as well as the political dimensions of nation formation. In his insightful study, Nigam (2006) argues that Dalit critiques implicitly undermined Westernised discourses of modernity and challenged the institutions of secular nationalism with demands for collective entitlements. The optimistic portrayal of India as a democratic *nation* by virtue of individuals’ commitment to the duties of citizenship, in this light, obscures the necessity for reconstruction and only makes sense if the modernist promises of nationalist rhetoric are taken at face value.

Detailed awareness of the contradictions between caste and democracy underpinned Ambedkar’s demand for separate electorates in which Dalits could vote for Dalit candidates who would represent their interests. Gandhi’s response was a ‘fast unto death’ which forced Ambedkar to accept the compromise (the Poona Pact) of a proportion of all general seats being reserved for Dalit candidates. The importance of these deliberations in the shaping of the ‘nation’ cannot be overstated, since “an historic opportunity in the lifetime of the nation for forging unity on the basis of equitable sharing of power with the new entrants to the political community was lost” (Aloysius 1997: 200). The implicit majoritarianism of Gandhi’s stance impeded Dalit demands for recognition. “Imperceptibly”, as Chatterjee (2001: 412) argues, “the homogeneity of India slides into the homogeneity of the Hindus”.

The resultant imbrication of caste and citizenship is unsustainable: Firstly because, “as an ideology of state-society relations, [caste] is in many ways the opposite of the concept of equality that India’s secular intellectuals consider to be the core value of the Indian state” (Mitra 1994: 52). Far from heralding Ambedkar’s ideal society, caste became integral to electoral competition; secondly – since Dalits do not form a majority in any constituency – Dalit candidates and parties are forced to make ‘compromises with *Manuvadi*’ (Pai 2003: 1). Thirdly, this entails that ‘non-Dalits decide which Dalits will win’ (Larbeer 1999: 8). The upshot of this threefold logic has been a form of ‘political sanskritisation’ in which Dalit parties and candidates have canvassed majority opinion rather than articulating alternatives. Even the most successful Dalit political party – the Bahujan Samaj Party – ‘works *within* the system’ and forges pragmatic alliances which help secure power whilst diluting its transformative agenda (Pai 2003: 10). As Omvedt insists, this contradicts the radical Dalit and non-Brahmin visions of an egalitarian nation free of caste:

The Phule/Ambedkar/Periyar tradition represents the effort to construct an alternative identity of the people, based on non-north Indian and low-caste perspectives (1994: 244).<sup>3</sup>

Instead, Omvedt, Nigam and Aloysius argue, India emerged as an elitist democracy in which socio-political power was concentrated in the hands of upper caste interests. We must, however, pause here and recollect India’s status as the world’s largest democracy. Banerjee’s (2007) paper admirably charts the commitment with which people from all social backgrounds religiously participate in elections, and notes how voter turn-out has gradually increased. Have 60 years under the auspices of a nationalising state committed (in principle

at least) to social justice, not mitigated the situation described above? Is there no truth in the projection of the political institutions of Indian democracy as the basis of the 'nation'?

Modernist assumptions and Dalit mobilisation cemented community identities into the constitutional framework of the Republic. Discrimination on the basis of caste became a punishable offence even as reservations allocated resources on that basis. Affirmative action - initiated as a stop-gap - has been reinforced and extended to more castes in the pursuit of social equity. Would we not be justified, from this perspective, from following Tonnesson (2004: 181) in regarding India as a 'national-state'? This formulation is attractive and foregrounds the centrality of the state to the process of nation-formation. I contend, however, that it entails the conflation of state and 'nation' by mistaking political intent for actual practice. To capture the degree to which an Indian *national* identity has crystallised (Mukherji 1998), we must chart the degree to which a 'sentiment of oneness' has emerged. To this end we turn now to the empirical data.

### **Methodological Anti-Nationalism?**

Data was collected in Tamilnadu between 1998-9 during a multi-sited ethnography of Dalit movements focussing on motivations, modes of operation, and ideological aspirations. The data consisted of 30 group discussions and 60 interviews (32 formal and 30 informal) with activists, leaders, academics and non-participating Dalits. Interviews were complemented with participant observation and analysis of speeches.<sup>4</sup> My childhood in Tamilnadu (from the age of 4 till 11), prior contacts and fluent conversational Tamil facilitated exchanges that probed beyond the surface details. My background aided access and explained my interest, but though my research aims were explained from the outset I was variously regarded as a human rights observer, a social worker, and a government official.

Irrespective of how I was seen, there was a pervasive desire to ‘send a message to the world’ and a determination to voice deprivations, demands and dreams. The movements in question mobilised around issues of citizenship, rights and social equality, which poses a methodological issue: To what extent can a critique of the ‘nation’ be based on the testimony of its most trenchant critics? Activists may distort or exaggerate reality to make a point. A strategic response to this problematic is to view the data as a *discursive* counter-narrative to the ‘nation’, but the question of how widespread such views are remains. Whilst drawing on a range of respondents, therefore, I focus on two group discussions with Dalit villagers who were only peripherally involved in movement activism.<sup>5</sup> Their views do not constitute a representative survey, but they offer an insight into the perceptions and prescriptions of Tamil Dalits.

### **Untouchable Citizens?**

Contrary to Banerjee’s (2007) sanguine account, Dalits in the villages of Vadianpatti and Kodankipatti (central Tamilnadu) had a less benign reading of the post-colonial state, and lacked a patriotic sense of Indian-ness. At the time of the interviews Dalits in both villages were subject to a social boycott, the former for ‘presuming’ to express an allegiance to the Dalit Panther Movement (DPI – the largest and most active Tamil Dalit movement), and the latter for refusing to perform ‘caste duties’. These, as Balasubramaniam (an insurance clerk and the most politically active of the villagers) explained, are incompatible with citizenship:

It is serf labour – if someone dies we have to tell the village about it, also the undertaking work has to be done by us. This work on the body and carrying the body to the cremation grounds is reserved for untouchables (Group 2).



The boycott meant that Dalits were not employed locally, were debarred from the public spaces of the village - such as the bus-stop - and denied the services of the local barber. Kodankipatti Dalits had shunned these demeaning tasks since 1990 which soured relations to the point that they were violently hounded out. They were pelted with stones, beaten with sticks and had their houses ransacked. In an episode that fractured the fragile sense of national-unity, they became refugees in their own land. Arulmozhi, an articulate mother of three, recalled the incident:

“Run you (*‘Wodu dee’*: *Dee* is the impolite, vulgar form of ‘you’),” they [dominant castes] said and spilt all our rice ... “What! Do you think there is room in this village for you? ... This is our place and we will rule it. We won’t keep downtrodden people here – you should remain subservient if you stay here” (Group 2).

Peace committees and government intervention saw the Dalits re-housed, but tensions resurfaced in 1999. A few months after my interview the Dalits were again displaced and their homes were smashed and burned. The cause of the renewed violence was the increasing autonomy of Dalit villagers. Though they were denied work locally, a bus route into the city offered them alternate employment and access to the liberatory rhetoric of Dalit movements. Like Narayan (2005), I encountered Dalits who had reinterpreted their lives through the prism of movement information. Whilst this fits the narrative of a democratising national society, it is one thing to construct a new sense of self it is another to make it stick. When Dalits staked a claim to ‘common land’ and screened a film in the village square, they transgressed the bounds of caste tolerance. Laxmanan, a forester and educated Dalit with no

political affiliation insisted that the problems stemmed from a fundamental disparity in social positions and perceptions:

None of the castes here have a notion of justice or whatever. The reason for this is that they are higher caste – they do not even feel that we are part of the same India (Interview: March 1999).

Balasubramaniam concurred, and illustrated the dissonance between state policy and caste practice:

If I came back to this village as a DSP [Deputy Superintendent of Police] - untouchable that I am – I could not go into the temple or drink tea in the village shop. I might be a DSP, but I'm born and bred in this village am I not, and so I cannot be accepted or revered here ... We can't partake in the Republic Day or Independence Day ceremonies, then this Independence for India has yet to be granted to the untouchables (Interview: March 1999).

One of the most popular rhetorical tropes employed by disaffected respondents was to hark back to the nationalist struggle and offer an alternate analysis. Chandran, an agricultural labourer from Vadianpatti – inspired by but unattached to the DPI – was typical in this regard:

Still we are suppressed! We haven't been liberated or received our independence yet. However high we rise, when we go there [to the main village] we are slaves. Under British rule all of us were suppressed, then it didn't seem

so bad. ... Saying we're going to win independence and protesting and winning independence – they haven't given us any freedom. He [Gandhi] got everyone independence but didn't give any to us. It is 50 years since Independence, but we still don't know what it means (Group 1).

Arulmozhi from Kodankipatti echoed this sentiment:

They say we got independence in 1947 from you – from the white people, but they [dominant castes] are the only ones who gained independence and they seek to suppress us just as much as your lot did (Group 2).

Their disillusionment with nationalist promises derives from bitter experience, and both groups pointed to the continuing practice of untouchability in the form of separate glasses at the tea-shop, unequal access to 'common resources' and a skewed agricultural resource base in which 'dominant castes' owned or controlled the productive land.<sup>6</sup>

I was recurrently confronted by statements that disputed the unity of India. Nor was this critique confined to disaffected villagers or radical militants. Palinivelu Swamy, the SC/ST secretary of the Bharatiya Janata Party (a Hindu nationalist party) in Tamilnadu, may have had a different prescription, but his diagnosis was the same:

“Hindusthan for the Hindus, get rid of the white people” – that was their demand.

All [nationalist] leaders did not seek independence for a single class or caste, but for the whole of India. But having fought so hard, with great difficulty and

bloodshed – often going hungry - to gain the paradise of freedom, after independence there has been an excess of untouchability (Interview: April 1999).

National optimists would point to the creation of spaces for the articulation of discontent and the Dalits' decreasing dependency – as evinced in their resistance. References to state policies support this: "Our only buttress", as Balasubramaniam averred, "is the reservation policy given to us by Ambedkar" (Interview, March 1999). Village Dalits, however, frequently punctured such analysis and unwittingly echoed Ambedkar's assertion that "caste has killed public spirit" by revealing the absence of a meaningful public sphere and enumerating the manifold ways in which caste continues to inform the daily patterns of village life. Laxmanan pointed to inequalities enacted in ritual fashion:

When the common God is worshipped or carried on a bier we cannot even go near. We have to stand ten feet away from its path. If we want to give a garland or an offering to the idol then we have to give it to a caste Hindu to do so. Even the God does not accept us according to this procedure (Interview: March 1999).

Village women listed the daily indignities and obstacles they faced in the use of common lands and water sources (Group 2). "Even in cremation grounds", Balasubramaniam concluded, "we have a separate cremation ground to theirs; that's how divided we are!" (Group 2). These perceptions were confirmed by interviews with local Backward Caste individuals, who admitted that Dalits were marginalised. They blamed 'inferiority complexes', but my Dalit respondents ridiculed such suggestions (Gorringe 2005: 185-7).

The idea of India, thus, surfaces most strongly as an absent presence or betrayed promise. The abandoned commitments and continuing atrocities that prompted Ambedkar to threaten to burn the constitution which he had drafted, are a recurrent theme. The failure of effective and meaningful land-reform programmes are seen to indicate the caste nature of the Indian polity:

Generally when politicians come up they take untouchability issues to heart. Periyar's doctrines and so on they take on board. If a film tackles social problems, they sit in the theatre and applaud the revolutionary utterances and praise the doctrines. But when it comes to practice those higher up in the caste hierarchy lag behind (Laxmanan Interview: March 1999).

Chandra Bose, leader of the Martyr Immanuel's Front (TIP – a mainly Pallar organisation), placed this discontent in a wider frame, pointing to the implicit biases of the constitution:

The laws for the 'Protection of India' are actually for the benefit of five interests. Who are they? Hindutva, then caste society in India, then after that the existing high castes, then after that big landlords, and finally the big capitalists. Without disturbing these five, without affecting the well-being of these five, we cannot do anything! (Interview: February 1999).

Village Dalits bemoan the inaction of state authorities and their disillusionment is amplified by movement activists who lament the abdication of government responsibility. Thirumavalavan, the DPI leader, railed against government passivity in the face of repeated warnings about trouble in Kodankipatti and described persistent inaction as connivance:

If, once, they shot someone setting fire to a cottage would others set fire to one thereafter? If you once tied up and shot someone who had attacked and murdered a Dalit would he be able to kill again? But they are not prepared to take these steps. You do not have to go that far. Do you not, at least, want to arrest them? (Speech: June 1999).

There is one law for ‘them’, was a common phrase, and another for ‘us’. Such accusations acquire added poignancy with the claim to indigenous status. In adapting colonial theories about the conquest of Dravidians by Aryans, Dalit movements portray themselves as thrice bereft; of their culture, their land and their rights:

Is India a Hindu nation? Whose country is it? Who are the ancestors of this land, who are the children of this earth? Who are the sons of the soil? Who are the kin of this land? We are! (Thirumavalavan Speech: July 1999).

Such accounts constitute an attempt to imagine a counter-culture in which the marginality of *cheris* (Dalit settlements outside the main village, or in the poorest areas of cities) becomes a potent symbol of a community that withstands ostracism to continuously confront the nation with its internal ‘Other’:

You can fight and beat Pakistan, you can overcome China, but you cannot suppress the *cheri* people of this land any more (Cinthanai Selvam, DPI Assistant General Secretary. Speech: June 1999).

As Chellamma from Kodankipatti expressed it; “They think that we should be slaves to them, but that we can never do!” (Group 2). Persistent atrocities against Dalits, vacancies in reserved jobs, and the abiding sense of disenfranchisement occasioned by electoral violence and compromised Dalit politicians have fuelled more radical demands. Some are no longer prepared to knock on the national door for admittance. F. Mathew, an activist and teacher in a Christian school, for example, sees little hope for integration:

Such opportunities as there are, are stolen one by one. We need a separate Dalitstan, Dalit government, Dalit economics and Dalit justice – only then would Dalit liberation be possible (Interview: January 1999).

Such ideas are not new, as Prashad notes; in the run up to Independence, “some Dalits demanded a nation of *achhuts* (Untouchables) alongside Pakistan called Achhutistan” (2000: 150-1).<sup>7</sup> Given the problems of assimilation presented by caste barriers, the call for secessionism is appealing. The fissiparous state of Dalits, however, renders such a community impracticable (even if internal differences were overcome). Dalit separatism, Prashad (2000: 152) astutely notes, has never been absolute and has functioned as an incendiary assertion of persistent inequality that accompanies calls for reservations and other means of alleviating the position of Dalits – a radical reminder of the still unfinished project of nation-formation. In its more nuanced forms, this demand is conjoined with an appeal for more localised participation and access to power. S. Martine, a child-labourer who became an advocate and development worker in Tindivanam, articulated such a vision:

Dalit politics ... can be captured in the mnemonic ‘LAMP’: Leninism – the abolition of colonial rule and recognition of national ethnic groups.

Ambedkarism – the abolition of caste. Marxism – economic equality; and Periyarism – the abolition of Brahmin domination and the achievement of sexual equality. ...

We originally started out with MAP, but felt that Leninism added something essential. Language based ethnic groups are dominant and so regional politics prevail – soon central rule will be impossible. “We don’t want to collaborate with the centre [Delhi]”, and “More power to the state [the regional power centres]” have been the slogans, which chime with the very important Dalit and local demand for the right to self-determination (Interview: January 1999).

Language-based ethnicity is hard to escape in Tamilnadu, where Tamil nationalist parties have dominated state politics since 1967. Indeed, the powerful sentiments unleashed by the interlinking issues of language, region and soil have meant that Dalit movements are often embroiled in sub-nationalist movements. The DPI, thus, confines its aspirations to the state:

We will eradicate caste and religion and create an equal society. We will break the social structure and eradicate poverty. Using the nationally given rights for ethnicities we will nurture a Tamil nation (a nation of Tamils undivided by caste) (Thirumavalavan, Speech: July 1999).

Whilst this offers the prospect of cross-caste coalitions along linguistic lines, it detracts from the pan-Indian possibilities for protest opened up by the term ‘Dalit’. Furthermore, whilst Thirumavalavan and Martine are not blind to caste dominance within the linguistic ‘nation’, they espouse an idealistic (and naïve) belief in the unity of ‘minorities, small farmers and labourers’ that is belied in the villages above. The Dalit activist critique, in other words,



remains wedded to the nation concept. In seeking to critique the elite basis of nationalism, however, Martine and others evoke a community that is more imaginary than that of the Indian state. Their position echoes Ilaiah's argument that "India has always been divided into two cultures and two civilisations: the Dalitbahujan [Dalit popular] and the brahminical" (2002: 127).

There is some credence for this argument given that lower castes worship different Gods, practice more plebeian (and less valued) folk arts and crafts and offer(ed) a bride-price rather than demanding a dowry. What neither position addresses sufficiently, however, is how fiercely protective of their status the intermediate castes are. When Kamaraj, a DPI activist, and others, state that "we are seen as aliens in our own land" (Interview, March 1999), they are referring primarily to the endemic caste clashes between *Backward Castes* and Dalits.<sup>8</sup> As Dalits have organised, the quotes above illustrate and Pandian (2000: 501) notes, Backward Caste groups have become increasingly violent to retain authority. The political mobilisation of caste communities has led to increased polarisation and a series of violent incidents which shatter the faith vested in Banerjee's (2007) "sacred elections". Two prominent examples are the Melavalavu massacre and the violence surrounding the DPIs decision to contest the 1999 Lok Sabha elections (Gorringe 2005). In Melavalavu (central Tamilnadu), when the local *panchayat* was reserved, BCs threatened violence, disrupted elections and then, when a president was elected, exacted a terrible price on the Dalit functionaries:

In this country we do not have the rule of law, we only have the rule of caste ...

What they say is: 'When I told you not to stand [for election] why did you ignore that? You stood, that is why I butchered you. In this country – this village – you should listen to what we say. You can be a big man wherever you want otherwise'

– this message was relayed even to officials. ... Murugesan [*Panchayat* president] and six others were attacked and killed. Murugesan especially was hacked to death and his head was thrown into a nearby well (Saktivel Interview: March 1999).

Facing such atrocities the DPI boycotted elections for a decade spoiling their ballots with messages such as: “Why do we, without the right to live, only have the right to vote?” The violence in Thirumavalavan’s constituency in 1999, after the abandonment of the poll boycott, did little to enhance their faith in the Republic:

We do not even have the right to vote in this country. They say it’s a people’s government/country – a democracy, a nation of high culture and custom. The downtrodden don’t even have the right to choose the representative whom they want in this land. How can we remain patient? (Saktivel Speech: September 1999).

Continuing political and social exclusion means that Dalits cannot square the competing communities of caste and nation, and there are recurrent demands for separate electorates. In protests, speeches and interviews they persistently shattered the image of India as a coherent nation. “Recently”, as Balasubramaniam exclaimed, “even blacks in South Africa have won their rights and their liberation, but we are denied our basic rights” (Interview: March 1999).

## **Discussion**

We return then to where we started and the nagging dissonance between caste, nation and state. This disjuncture was crystallized when the political survival of the nascent state was

premised on a series of alliances with pre-capitalist structures which precluded the possibility of meaningful social change (Aloysius 1997: 216). The attempt to construct the newly independent Republic as a bastion of egalitarian, democratic practice portrayed caste as a 'traditional relic' with a discredited past and a limited future. Nigam (2006) demonstrates how historians have adopted this modernist nationalist portrayal of caste and, as witnessed above, the silencing of caste also permeates social scientific analysis. Incredibly, a recent book by a collection of high profile academics (Sen 2003) can speak of 'India's national culture' with barely a mention of caste. Various visionaries, from Gandhi to Azad, are excerpted but there is no room for the insights of Phule, Periyar or Ambedkar. Ambedkar is cited ... but only by reference to the imposition of Hindi as a national language. Where caste is mentioned it is with embarrassment that it has yet to disappear in a secular and modern India (Vatsyayan 2003: 104).

This blindness in relation to caste enables scholars to speak of a national identity united around the common 'languages' of cricket, cuisine and Bombay films (Sen 2003, Chandhoke 2003: 94, Banerjee 2007: 1560). Ignoring the northern bias in the choice of Bollywood (and the problematic relationship between caste, class and cinema), the notion that cricket and cuisine remain untainted by the vagaries of caste, class and region beggars belief.<sup>9</sup> Writing against the grain of such studies, and following the lead of Aloysius, Nigam and Chatterjee, this paper has questioned whether India is a national-state and interrogated the extent to which previously ostracised groups have been integrated. It has sought, in Nigam's (2006: 177) terms, to "explore precisely what is left unexplored when we begin with the *a priori* assumption of nation in existence".

So long as the state-nation avoids the painful issues and political decisions that could reconstitute social relations (eg. land-reforms) it will remain in an unhappy limbo – denied the ‘fundamental legitimacy’ that is accorded by the alignment of state and nation. The successive challenges to the state-nation from linguistic, regional, religious, ethnic and caste groups result from the incongruity between the imagined community of the state and everyday reality. A “sense of common nationhood”, as Connor rightly argues, “is not compatible with a cross-cutting class cleavage as deep and unremitting as that between slave and landowner” (1994: 157). Untouchability, it is clear, is irreconcilable with nationhood and undermines the democratic project.

Whilst Dalits continue to be marginalised India must abandon pretensions to nationhood. In rejecting secessionist demands or radical disengagement, however, Dalit movements have reinvigorated the question of nation-formation and entwined it with democratic reform: “Only when [constitutional] rights reach the lowest person”, Jeyanthi Natarajan, a prominent Women’s and Dalit rights campaigner, insists, “can we call this a democracy!” (Speech: November 1999). 60 years after Independence, my respondents testify to the current significance of ‘The Untouchable Question’, and the tension between “the ‘political’ and the ‘social’” (Prashad 1996: 551). They bear witness to continuing untouchability and the realisation that some Indians regard others as less ‘Indian’ than themselves, which was never more apparent than in the differential treatment reportedly meted out to tsunami victims.

Given the prevalence of anti-Dalit discrimination some activists remain wedded to separatism. Krishnabaraianar of the Ambedkar Revolutionary Movement (a marginal, militant outfit), for instance, demanded: ‘Separate Land! A separate Dalit land! Let us raise the slogan and a thousand of us go to jail. We will declare autonomy’ (Speech: December

1999). At first sight Dhanalakshmi, the sister of a DPI activist who resented the drain on family resources that his activism entailed, seems to concur: 'The day will come', she insisted, 'and not in the distant future, but soon, when we will gain our independence; *Our* Independence Day, *our* freedom day!' (Informal Interview: July 1999). The similarities between the two sentiments are deceptive, however, as Dhanam's vision was not an autonomous Dalit state, but the more pragmatic desire for a share of political power, and a greater degree of social equality. The 'nation' envisaged here is a plural and civic entity that mirrors Ambedkar's conceptualisation and echoes Connor's analysis:

If a society describes itself as a democracy, then the refusal to permit large sections of the populace to participate in the political process may be viewed as tantamount to declaring that those who are disenfranchised are not members of the nation (1994: 158).

The demand, thus, is for the democratisation of Indian democracy, which requires an understanding of citizenship and national identity as differentiated by caste. It is here that Dalit movements diverge most clearly from the projects of Backward and Other Backward Castes and Classes. Whilst some Dalits fall prey to the politics of identity, the radical potential of Dalit mobilisation is the implicit advocacy of a politics of redistribution that would grant *everybody*, rather than specific groups and elites, a stake in the nation. Concrete steps to this end would include: ensuring that ballot boxes are not located in areas of single-caste dominance; minimising the dependency of rural Dalits on other castes for employment, water and land; recruiting a police force that does not reflect the caste composition of the locality. Achieving such alterations will be neither easy nor, necessarily, popular, but if the

contested politico-cultural terrain that is India is to crystallise into a national state, then more effort is needed to integrate the margins.

## **Conclusion**

The nation needs to be ‘imagined’, but it is clear that imagination alone is an insufficient coagulant: the Dalit activists’ veneration of Ambedkar and repeated appeals for the implementation of the constitution bear witness to the latent sense of community offered by the ‘idea of India’. Repeated failures by state authorities to enforce land-reforms, reservations or prosecutions, however, reveal how insular the imagined community of elites remains. As Aloysius concludes:

Nationalism does not mechanically engender the nation. In the absence of actual change within society, in our case the destruction of the Brahminic social order, nationalism’s relation to the masses remains ambiguous at best. Here the process of invention is displaced by one of prevention (1997: 225).

Speaking at a demonstration to condemn poll violence, *Puthiya Tamizhagam’s* (New Tamilnadu – 2<sup>nd</sup> largest Dalit movement in the state) Madurai representative Alexander captured the nationalist elite’s circumvention of difficult questions:

In 1922 Gandhi declared for a national parliament. Father Periyar asked Gandhi: ‘Will the independence we receive be caste freedom, communalist freedom, ethnic freedom or nationalist freedom?’ ‘Why ask?’ Gandhi retorted. At that time, he said, none knew what independence would mean and he grew angry and told Periyar: ‘First let the hen lay the egg, then we can decide whether to make a fried

egg, omelette or boil it'. Then Father Periyar asked: 'Gandhiji, it is not my wish to deny us getting independence – it is not my aim to prevent the hen from laying the egg. But eggs which are forced out may be rotten and what should we do then? (Speech: September 1999).

Nationalist narratives, as Guru (1998: 157) notes, remained deliberately vague on the subject of power and resources. Dalit leaders, therefore, drew on alternate narratives and vocabularies to voice a cogent critique of the nascent 'nation'. In engaging with socio-political opponents and confounding cultural codes, Dalit protest has placed the caste of the 'nation' at the centre of contemporary debates. In so doing they have opened up new spheres of civic engagement and rekindled the opportunities to imagine India that were bypassed by the nationalist struggle. The 'nation', 'Tada' Periyasami (Assistant General Secretary of the DPI) insisted, faces two options:

The Gandhian way [which] does not change society but advocates adjustment – all living as harmonious castes. The other way is that of struggle and revolution – which seeks to create a new society not maintain the old one (Interview: November 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> Untouchables are officially known as Scheduled Castes (SCs) referring to the castes on a list (Schedule) of communities deemed to require affirmative action. STs are Scheduled Tribes.

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<sup>2</sup> Significantly the Mandal commission called for suitable institutional, financial and technical assistance for members of traditional vocational communities like potters who wanted to set up small scale industries of their own. Such schemes would integrate 'caste work' into the national pantheon.

<sup>3</sup> Jyotirao Phule was a Maharashtrian ideologue and social reformer who campaigned for women's and Dalits' rights (Zelliot 1996: 37-45). EVR or Periyar (great one) was a Tamil nationalist who articulated an ideal of a socialist, caste-free and egalitarian society (See Pandian 1995).

<sup>4</sup> 'Formal' interviews were pre-arranged and tape-recorded. Informal ones were spontaneous and involved more dialogue. Where appropriate I have used pseudonyms and altered locations.

<sup>5</sup> Group 1, in Vadianpatti, assembled in a shrine-like building dedicated to the DPI. The local leader, however, was absent and the group was critical of the movement. The group consisted of five men, all agricultural labourers or 'coolie' workers in Madurai. Group 2, in Kodankipatti, consisted of five women and two men (Balasubramaniam and Laxmanan were also interviewed separately) and took place in an empty house. None of the women worked since local agricultural opportunities were denied to them. The discussions were dominated by some respondents but everyone contributed. Both discussions occurred in March 1999.

<sup>6</sup> These broad caste categories are misleading as they do not map onto homogenous blocks. Vulnerable Dalits, however, lumped the upper castes together in the term 'dominant castes' (*Aadhikar Jaadi*) - See Gorringe (2005: 122-4). Ambedkar similarly notes: Whilst 'this division of touchables against untouchables may require explanation, the division so far as modern India is concerned is real and substantial' (1989: 192).

<sup>7</sup> This demand finds an interesting parallel in Gellner's (1983: 106) observation that pariah minorities often face persecution in the new states. He outlines two solutions: assimilation or the forging of a distinct nation (such as Israel). Where neither option is available, he remarks, 'the plight of the blues [read Dalits] is serious indeed' (1983: 69).

<sup>8</sup> Tamil society is (crudely) stratified into three main caste clusters: Brahmins, Backward and Scheduled Castes. The Varna categories of *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya* are largely absent here. Backward Castes (BC) - whilst touchable - also suffered caste discrimination and receive reservations. Politically speaking, the phrase is a misnomer since BCs dominate Tamil politics and society.

<sup>9</sup> See Anand (2007) and other contributors to the *Himal Southasian* 20(7) edition on sport in South Asia.

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